



Why You Can't Afford NOT To Do Technical Documentation

A Shoap Technical Services Whitepaper



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Introduction:

It is hard enough to focus on the day-to-day priorities of releasing a new or revised product, let alone remember to deal with the details that support those products. Technical documentation often falls into the category of lost and forgotten details. Documentation is easy to ignore – it costs money and no one likes to do it. However, the costs of not having sufficient documentation are great. Not only does the lack of solid documentation cut into potential profit, but there are also legal problems associated with improper or incomplete documentation.

First off, what is technical documentation? Most technical documentation falls into three broad categories: user-facing materials, company training documents, and compliance and other legal documentation.

User-facing materials are aimed at helping the customer better understand and effectively use products. These often include product user guides, technical reference materials, and online help.

Company training documents are used to teach employees about a company's products and company policy or how to properly perform specific tasks, either related to employees' jobs or the company's products. Sometimes training materials are focused on new hires, others on transitioning roles to other people or departments, and still others on updating processes or policies.

The last category is compliance and legal documentation. In any industry, there are very specific compliance-related rules that must be followed to release a product. The majority of these guidelines are fulfilled by documentation that must follow precise formats and with the correct information. All of these types of documentation are important to consider.

Advantages:

Each type of technical documentation provides advantages to a company. User-facing materials benefit a company most by improving customer support and satisfaction. Good documentation ensures that customers are better equipped to use products without needing to call and speak with a company representative. The obvious advantages are an

increase in customer satisfaction and a reduction in support costs. Most companies report a drastic decrease in the number of unhappy customers calling their support lines after improving their technical documentation.

Support rep help

"Poor skills and knowledge on the part of the Customer Support rep can, and generally does, create MORE calls!"
-RWK Enterprises;
customer satisfaction consulting

Another often overlooked benefit of clear documentation materials is greater technical resource availability within the company itself. Since fewer customers are calling with product questions, the technical staff doesn't have to handle as many support calls. In smaller companies that don't have staff to handle excessive support calls, developers are often the only available resource to explain products and troubleshoot problems. Having fewer calls frees developers to do their true jobs – developing products. In larger businesses, while there may be sufficient staff to handle an influx of calls, if customer service staff is using incomplete, incorrect or hard-to-understand materials, they can't help the customer in an efficient and useful way and must refer those calls to the technical staff.

When this happens, the technical resources are drawn away from their true responsibilities. With correct documentation, customer support can actually help solve the customers' problems. Therefore, in both small and large companies, correct and easy to use documentation can improve the allocation of technical talent within a company and help maintain or even reduce headcount.

Proper employee training is an integral part of any successful company. It is often difficult to determine how to best deliver training so that the employees retain the information without spending too much time in the classroom (hence, too much time away from the cubes). Technical training documents can address these problems by simplifying and streamlining processes, as well as shortening the time it takes to deliver the training. Training materials can target several problems.

First, technical training documents can smooth the transition for new employees, giving them a good foundation for understanding their new roles in the company. With any company, there is employee turnover. Technical materials ensure that no important information is lost during the transition, as well as helping new hires successfully step into new roles with minimal disruption.

Second, technical training materials quickly disseminate changes in policy or methods within a company: Changes can be quickly instituted and integrated into the workplace with minimal disruption to productivity. Since employees can refer to these materials when they have time, the training can take place without bringing productivity to a standstill.

People need to know expectations of job to be satisfied w/ it

According to Edwin A. Locke's Range of Affect Theory, job satisfaction is determined by a discrepancy between what people want from a job and what they have. Perceived capability of one's ability to do their job is linked to this gap.

Finally, well-trained employees improve productivity. Industrial psychologists have found that job satisfaction increases an employee's productivity and job productivity increases with an employee's perceived capability—that is, employees who are confident in their ability to do their job feel more satisfied with their work. By creating easy-to-follow technical training materials, a company can make sure that all employees are equally equipped to do their jobs with confidence. This confidence will translate to greater productivity at work.

Compliance documentation is required by many governmental and regulated industries. Sarbanes-Oxley requires companies to provide documentation for all aspects of their financial transactions, as well as for any other controls or procedures within the company. Companies that process credit card transactions are required to meet PCI requirements to avoid costly fines and security breaches. Again, much of the PCI requirements involve documenting procedures and processes. And finally, many companies find that selling products in the B2B space requires that they deliver in-depth documentation with their products (to banks, for example). Many times companies have to scramble to produce the necessary documentation at the last minute in order to proceed with the sale. This headache can be avoided by maintaining proper documentation.

Problems People Often Experience with Documentation:

With the many obvious benefits of having a full arsenal of technical documents, it is surprising how many companies either have gaps in their documentation or no documentation at all. There are three main barriers that companies cite for not dealing with documentation: time, money, and personnel.

Time is the most common reason companies go without technical documentation. Most companies perceive documentation as a daunting project with limited returns.

**Documentation saved
Anchor time and
money**

In a case study on Anchor Manufacturing Company, researchers found that creating documentation saved programmers both time and money.

This misconception has hurt many a company. There is so much focus on the product itself, that when the time comes to actually release the product, there isn't enough time to write the supporting documentation. And then there's the problem of deciding what documentation to write: what type of documentation should be produced? What most companies don't realize is that in many cases, proper documentation eases difficulties within the company, such that an investment of time at the outset will garner large returns of time at a later date. There are many technical writing consultants available to help companies analyze what documents would be most beneficial.

Another concern regarding documentation voiced by many companies is monetary cost. Money is a valid concern for every business. However, the investment in proper documentation will generate large returns in the long run. Technical documentation has been proven time and time again to improve customer satisfaction, streamline business processes, provide legal protection, and most importantly, increase profit. The return on investment is obvious.

Finally, there is the lack of qualified personnel. For most documentation needs, this should be a non-issue. A trained technical writer can fulfill documentation needs, whether he or she is a full-time internal employee or technical writing consultant. A skilled technical writer should need minimal guidance to accomplish the project successfully.

Internal vs. External Documentation Resources:

Once a company acknowledges that it needs technical documentation, it must determine whether to hire an internal resource or outsource the function. There are advantages and disadvantages to both, but there are a couple of things to consider when weighing each choice.

The often-stated advantage of full-time internal resources is product knowledge. Full-time hires become product experts: They don't need to "ramp up" on the product. They also become general resources within the company for other projects that require some kind of writing.

Unfortunately, internal resources often get pulled away from their area of expertise to help in other ways – such as to help with presentations, to rewrite letters, etc. – even though they

may not have the training to do these other functions. Other times, if the demand for technical documentation is not constant, the writer has nothing to do. With software cycles, many companies have problems keeping their writing staff busy. Peaks and valleys in software workflow mean full-time technical writers have to “invent” projects when there's nothing to do. Paying technical writers to sit idle or invent new projects wastes money.

Another disadvantage of internal documentation staff is that the technical documentation of most companies only requires one or at most, two full-time writers. This makes them the single resource for all documentation, which handicaps the review process. Ideally, technical writing is always done with a team approach, so that documents are reviewed at every stage for errors or possible improvements. When a single person is in charge of both writing and editing documentation, costly mistakes are more likely to make their way into the final documents.

The other option for documentation is an external documentation resource. The advantages of an external resource are obvious: when there's no work, there's no one to pay.

External documentation sources often come from technical writing firms with built-in processes to ensure many pairs of eyes see the documents. This team approach in the writing and editing stages assures a high quality product.

The other advantage of external documentation specialists is logistical ease. A documentation firm takes care of logistics and scheduling of the project. If a company needs to cut the number of hours billed for documentation, a technical writing consulting firm can cut hours from a project easily, diverting the resource to other projects. Internal resources would not provide such flexibility, as they would still need to be paid full-time.

Also, if a change to documentation needs to be made at the last minute, a documentation firm usually has the man power to handle such requests, whereas a single internal resource might not be able to accommodate such requests. With an external documentation resource, a company has much greater flexibility to accomplish projects along a specific timeline within a certain budget.

Hiring difficulties

"It's often hard for hiring managers to know what to look for in a possible technical writer... You need experienced writers who know how to learn in-depth, not just superficially--you need people who know how to build an understanding and not a passing familiarity. "
-TECHWR-L article on hiring technical writers

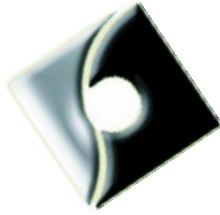
Finally, since companies are not skilled at hiring technical writers – they rarely know what characteristics to look for when hiring a technical writer – the outsourced company can provide high quality people.

The purported disadvantage of using external resources to do technical documentation is the lack of specific product knowledge. Often the writer is not there for the whole development process, so he or she will need more support from the technical staff to fully understand the product. While there is some truth in this argument, the real facts are these: A good technical writer should be able to figure out what a product does with minimal input from the technical staff. Moreover, if a company builds a relationship with a technical writing consulting firm, that product knowledge is there in the company, much in the same way that an advertising firm gains knowledge of a company and its products.

Don't Put Off Documentation!

Once a company realizes it has a need for documentation services of any type, it is important to make documentation a part of any development plan. A successful product or business plan should include allowances of time and other resources to ensure proper documentation from the beginning. Often people forget about documentation until a problem arises. At this point, many companies have not made proper allowances for documentation in their plans, so they either ignore the problem, or must scramble to get documentation at the last minute, making it sometimes ineffective and expensive.

A company can't afford not to have proper documentation. It is important not to wait until the last minute to address documentation needs, because it will be more expensive or too late. Consider documentation as a necessity instead of an afterthought. This will cut costs substantially and make the company more productive and efficient. Don't put off documentation. You can't afford NOT to do it!



About Shoap Technical Services:

At Shoap Technical Services, we work with you to quickly become a member of your team. Our expertise in documentation and training preparation allows us to provide professional leadership for the team. We are experts in creating all of the documentation services described in this whitepaper and customizing them to your needs. We can demonstrate all of the documentation and training options available and then discuss the timeframes, budget, and requirements of the chosen project. Our mission is to provide you with value-added service on each and every project.

Our writers are extremely technical, with degrees and backgrounds in computer science and engineering, and our editors have advanced degrees in composition and communication. We understand software and business processes, and can translate technical concepts into easy-to-follow material for a variety of audiences.

We are flexible, so we can take on all of the documentation and training responsibilities for a company, or work with an in-house technical writing group to provide the support you need. We are just as comfortable carrying a process through from start to finish as we are helping our clients start a project and then transitioning it back or finishing a project already in process. We are here to support what you need. For more information, you can contact us at info@shoap.com or visit our website www.shoap.com.

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